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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this study was to identify curricular experiences and teacher behaviors encouraging preschool children to meaningfully use written language. A second goal was to investigate children's growth in literacy in the context of a preschool classroom. The study was conducted over a 5-month period among 8 Head Start and 8 tuition-paying children whose ages ranged from 3 years, 3 months to 4 years, 10 months. The sample's mean age was 3 years, 10 months. In collaboration with the teacher, the researcher chose 6 of the children for videotaping and planned and implemented a literacy curriculum involving print in the environment, writing, booksharing, and dictated language experiences. Targeted children were videotaped daily over a 4.5-month period as they engaged in literacy events during free-choice time. A total of 32 hours of videotaped literacy events were analyzed to determine the impact of the curriculum on the children and teachers. Additional data were obtained through the administration of literacy tasks at the beginning and end of the study, a parent questionnaire, researcher's field notes, samples of the children's writing, and the teacher's daily log. Findings indicated that the teacher was the most important factor in facilitating children's growth in literacy. (RH)

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# Evaluation of a Curriculum to Support Literacy Growth in Young Children

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Abstract

Evaluation of a Curriculum to Support Literacy Growth in Young Children

This study entailed the development, implementation, and formative evaluation of a curriculum to support preschool children's growth in literacy. The study was conducted over a 5 month period in a preschool classroom in which half of the children were in a Head Start program and the other half were tuition students. The literacy events of 6 children from this classroom were videotaped daily. Videotape data was supplemented by other data sources including weekly collaborative meetings between the teacher and the researcher. Children were administered three literacy tasks at the beginning and end of the study to supplement observational data. Analysis of the data indicates that all six grew in their interest in and knowledge of written language. Implications for curriculum materials and experiences which support growth in literacy were generated from the data.

# Evaluation of a Curriculum to Support Literacy Growth in Young Children

Over the last ten years there has been growing interest in the literacy development of young children. The antecedents of the theoretical work and research on literacy have been the revision of linguistic theory initiated by Noam Chomsky and the development of the field of psycholinguistics, including research on language acquisition. This research has led to a search for the parallels between the acquisition of spoken and written language. A number of researchers and theoreticians have applied the language acquisition model to the acquisition of literacy, hypothesizing that children could learn to read and write through a process similar to learning to talk (Smith, 1978; Goodman & Goodman, 1979).

The research on early literacy has also grown out of the ascendancy of constructivism as the dominant theoretical model for describing learning processes. Cognitive psychologists such as Frank Smith (1971), Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (1982), and others have tried to apply the insights gained from schema theory, information processing, and Piagetian research to the child's learning to read and write. Their

research is consistent with and supported by the research on language acquisition.

As a result of these and other studies existing conceptions of the development of reading and writing ability in children are under serious attack. Much of what was believed a decade or two ago about young children's knowledge of written language as well as what was believed about factors facilitating growth in reading and writing are being revised. Even the term "reading readiness" has been discarded by many.

Several longitudinal studies of children's literacy development, primarily done by parents (Bissex, 1980; Taylor, 1983; Baghban, 1984), have attempted to clarify our understanding of the process of literacy growth, and they have particularly illustrated the great interest young children have in written language. However most of the existing research on literacy has occurred in the home rather than in the preschool classroom, and little attention has gone to the systematic development of a preschool curriculum to support literacy growth. The majority of attention to a literacy curriculum has focused at the kindergarten level and above (Holdaway, 1979; Clay, 1979a; Graves, 1983) even though it is clear that the prekindergarten years are a time when many children lay a solid foundation which greatly

facilitates their ability to cope with formal literacy instruction.

This study involved the formative evaluation of a preschool literacy curriculum derived from the existing research and theory on literacy growth in young children, from the research on language acquisition, using it as a model for literacy acquisition, as well as from the general principles which guide early childhood curriculum development. The main goal of the study was to identify those curricular experiences and teacher behaviors which encouraged children to engage with written language in meaningful ways so that they had opportunities to construct knowledge of the forms and functions of print. A second goal was to look at individual literacy growth in the context of a preschool classroom.

## Method

### The Participants

The research site chosen for this study was a classroom in a demonstration lab school at a large, urban, Midwestern university. The class had 8 Head Start and 8 tuition-paying children: 4 blacks, 10 whites, and 2 Orientals. The children's ages ranged from 3.3 (in years and months) to 4.10 with a mean age of 3.10. The teaching staff included a head teacher

with a masters degree in early childhood education, an assistant teacher with an associate degree, and a graduate student.

In collaboration with the teacher, the researcher chose 6 of the children for videotaping, 3 girls and 3 boys. Four of the children were from the Head Start program and 2 were tuition children, 3 whites, 2 blacks, and 1 Oriental child. Their ages at the inception of the study were: 3.4, 3.4, 3.7, 3.9, 4.3, and 4.5. Some of the factors considered in the choice of these 6 children were: SES, sex, race, age, how understandable their speech was, their school absentee rate, and the teacher and researcher's perceptions of their current level of literacy knowledge.

Design

This study involved the implementation and evaluation of a curriculum to support preschool children's growth in literacy. The researcher and preschool teacher collaborated in planning the literacy curriculum and shared insights into the children's growth in literacy knowledge. The six targetted children were videotaped daily over a four and one half month period as they engaged in literacy events during free choice time. The videotapes were analyzed to determine the impact of the curriculum on the six

individual children and, as much as possible, the impact of the curriculum on the other children and the teacher.

A case study approach was chosen because an in depth examination of how individual children interact with the curricular materials and experiences was the focus of the study. Harste, Woodward, & Burke (1984) argue that "in order to judge the quality of a literacy experience one must judge the quality of the mental trip taken, not the arrival point" (p. 18). Six detailed case studies were generated from the data (Harris, 1985). The curriculum evaluation was in large part based on these case studies.

Procedure

The primary source of data in this study was 32 hours of videotaped literacy events involving the six targetted children. Other sources included data from three literacy tasks administered at the beginning and end of the study, a parent questionnaire, researcher field notes, writing samples from the children, and a daily log kept by the head teacher.

The videotape camera was turned on when any of the 6 children was engaged in a literacy event, and an attempt was made to capture a literacy event from start to finish. Literacy events, as defined by Heath (1982), are: "occasions in which written language is integral

to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (p. 50). The definition of literacy events used by Anderson, Teale, & Estrada (1980) in a study of low-income preschool children's literacy events guided the determination of which activities were videotaped.

> we look for events in which the child interacts with objects as if s/he is reading or writing. That is to say, if the child "reads" a story or sign or whatever (even though what the child says may have little or no relation to the graphic configuration present), we consider this a reading event. In essence we have expanded the notion of reading and writing to include any reading- or writing-like behavior which mimics components of the activities that are generally considered reading and writing. (p. 59)

The videotape data was viewed by the researcher and a record was made of the nature of the literacy events and the macro-behaviors (in general what the teachers and children said and did, rather than a micro-analysis of behaviors). Occasionally a detailed transcription was made of an event. Daily field notes were taken to supplement the videotapes. Literacy events which were observed but not videotaped for some reason, were

recorded, as well as events not observed but reported to the researcher by the teaching staff. Also recorded were any events viewed as having a significant impact on the classroom, on teacher behavior, or on the curriculum. A record was made of all materials which were part of the literacy curriculum, and children placed their writing and drawing in folders and photocopies were made of papers with any form of writing or writing-like graphics.

The classroom teacher and researcher met for approximately an hour each week to discuss the curriculum, individual children, and to plan additions to the curriculum. Insights into the curriculum from both parties were shared at these meetings. Occasionally videotapes were viewed to solicit the teacher's perspective. Meetings were audiotaped and notes on what was discussed were later made from these tapes. In addition to the meetings the teacher kept a daily log of her reflections on the curriculum and the literacy learning. These logs included accounts of literacy events in which she had been involved, and they were especially helpful in gaining insights into the teacher's experience with implementing the curriculum.

Three literacy tasks were administered to each of the sixteen children at the beginning and end of the

study. The purpose of these tasks was to gather some baseline data on children's literacy knowledge at the start of the study and to compare this data to their literacy knowledge as described by these tasks at the end of the study. The children were videotaped during the administration of the tasks and later their responses were recorded on data sheets from the videotapes.

In Task I each child was presented with a set of cards containing the first names of each child in the class. Children were presented with the names one at a time and asked to identify them. The purpose of this task was to see how aware the children were of environmental print since all the children had had repeated exposure to other children's names as well as their own name for over two months. Task II was an assessment of letter-name knowledge, given because it has been suggested that this knowledge is most likely exhibited by young children with many prior print experiences (Mason, 1984). Task III was a book-handling assessment adapted by Goodman and Altwerger (1981) from Marie Clay's (1979b) Concepts About Print Test. The goal of this assessment was to identify those children who had many prior experiences with books.

Parents of all 16 children were asked to complete a

questionnaire developed by Jana Mason (1980) which asked about the kinds of literacy experiences their children were having in the home as well as parental perceptions of their children's literacy knowledge.

## Results

The purposes of this study were twofold. The major goal was to clarify what constitutes a preschool curriculum which supports young children's growth in literacy. The second goal was to gather further information on the literacy growth of young children, particularly as that happens in the context of a preschool classroom.

All children in the class grew in their interest in print, some far more than others, and most children increased the amount of time they spent engaged in literacy events over the course of the study. All children demonstrated a greater knowledge of the forms and functions of print at the end of the study. The strongest evidence of this growth comes from the observational data more so than from the three literacy tasks. These tasks were not sensitive enough to allow children to demonstrate many of the observed changes in their literacy knowledge. The data from the tasks indicates that the majority of the children were aware of the print in books at the end of the study, and

several children had the beginnings of the concept of a word. All children increased in their ability to read the names of children in the class, with most children reading the majority of their classmates' names, and most increased in letter-name knowledge,.

## The Curriculum

The curriculum materials and activities were divided into four categories: environmental print, writing, booksharing, and language experience. These were somewhat arbitrary categories created for purposes of organization in thinking about the curriculum. For example, the writing and language experience categories frequently converged during the study. However grouping the curriculum under these four areas was a useful organizational tool, and findings from each will be summarized.

### Environmental Print

The environmental print in the classroom included: children's written names in a wide variety of contexts, message boards, directions for how to use materials in the classroom, labels on materials, alphabet materials, enlarged print charts to accompany songs, poems, and recipes, signs and other print materials accompanying dramatic play environments, such as empty food boxes and word cards with pictures cues accompanying the print.

Much of the print was interpreted for children by the teachers, but, as much as possible, print was placed in a rich enough context to allow children to independently read it.

One of the major goals for providing print in the environment was to draw children's attention to it so that they would have increased opportunities to construct knowledge of the forms and function of print. Children's attention was drawn to the print in the classroom in several ways. Sometimes they needed to know what the print said, such as reading name cards to find seating at the lunch table. Sometimes reading particular print became a part of their daily routines because adults called attention to it repeatedly at a certain point in the day, for example the reading of the hall message board immediately upon arrival at school. Enlarged print charts of songs and poems were used by the teacher during group times, with children watching as the teacher pointed to the print while she sang or said the words. If a chart had manipulable parts, children often returned to it during their free choice time to put the matching words or phrases onto the chart and to re-sing the song or say the poem, trying to point to the print as they had seen the teacher do it at group time. So in general, children were most interested in

print which served some function in their everyday lives.

The environmental print which children found most engaging was their names. For some children names proved a major source of information for advancing their knowledge of the forms of print. For example, one child worked on the uses of upper and lower case letters through comparing the lower case "e" in his name with the upper case "E" in his best friend's name. On another occasion this same child may have been clarifying an hypothesis about how concrete objects are represented in print when he compared the number of letters in two of the children's names and the difference in the children's physical size (the smaller child had the longer name). Another child was working on ways of processing print information, particularly the problem of directionality, when she struggled with matching cards with first and last names to hooks which were labelled with only first names. Initially she matched only the initial letters of children's last names to initial letters in children's first names, but quickly realized that the names were not properly matched. For some children, the initial letter in their name was the key to awakening their interest in letters, and this interest often expanded to the initial letters

in other children's names.

The most ignored print was print which gave directions in the various centers in the room, such as the sign in the block area which said, "What can you build with the blocks?" Most children only looked at this print when teachers called attention to it. Similarly the majority of the children showed little interest in the letters of the alphabet which were placed in the room (magnetic and wooden letter sets, alphabet puzzles, and a model of the alphabet placed above the writing center). However, the letters which went with the song, "If your name begins with the letter __", were quite popular. Children not only used these letters with the song, but they enjoyed putting them on a magnetic board. The children's names had made the letters meaningful. This was also evident when several children identified letters by the names of children in the class (e.g., "D" was called Daniel). Those few children who showed interest in alphabet materials in the classroom came from homes where alphabet letter names had been taught.

Booksharing

The goals for booksharing were four-fold. First, booksharing was to instill motivation in children to read books and to seek further book experiences.

Second, while reading books, children were to have opportunities for prediction based on both the language patterns of the book and on story structure, as well as opportunities to self-monitor and self-correct during independent re-readings. Third, children were to have experience with a variety of books so that they would become familiar with the unique language of books. Fourth, children were to have opportunities to learn print conventions, such as where the story begins, the story comes from the print, and similar information. With some children all four goals were reached. With a few children even the first goal, motivation to seek booksharing experiences, was not reached, so meeting the other goals was impossible.

Whole group experiences with children's literature included showing filmstrips of books, flannel board versions of stories, dramatizations, reading big books, and, on a few occasions, reading regular-sized books which were popular with the group. However reading regular-sized books at group time was rarely done because of the concern that children could not adequately see the books. The study was guided by the premise that optimal booksharing occurs in intimate settings rather than in whole group experiences.

A wide variety of books were introduced into the

classroom over the course of the study. Two types of books consistently emerged as favorites of the children, those with predictable language patterns which could be quickly memorized and those books which dealt with every day events in the children's lives. Both types of books were repeatedly requested by children, enjoyed at the listening post, and re-read independently.

Teachers spent long blocks of time engaged in booksharing. A couple of the children typically initiated booksharing sessions when they asked to have books read, and they were often joined by other children. Less frequently teachers initiated the booksharing. A small group of two or three children usually assembled for stories, although some popular books attracted many more children. Most children joined a reading group until their requested book was read, and then left after "their book". When books were read in visible locations, typically a few feet out of the book area alcove, more children noticed the booksharing and joined in.

More teacher time was available for booksharing when children operated independently in the classroom. Therefore classroom organization and management which supported children's independence were important factors in the number of books read. If there were special

activities in the classroom which required the continual supervision of one teacher, for example, cooking experiences, lengthy book sessions generally did not occur. Teachers who became involved in booksharing sessions had difficulty adequately supervising the room, so these were only possible when other teachers could serve this function.

Some children avoided booksharing sessions and rarely chose to look at books independently or to hear books read. These children appear to fall into two categories: children who had long, daily booksharing sessions in their homes in which they heard a variety of books and children who rarely heard books read in their homes. It sometimes was difficult to know which category particular children fell into and the accuracy of information from parents was uncertain in some cases.

Those children who did not have a deep familiarity with books chose to read books mainly because of exposure to highly engaging books and through teacher encouragement. Books which had movable parts (e.g., flaps which lift up) with minimal text, along with very simple, predictable books were appealing to them. Books which dealt with themes that were highly significant in the children's lives also interested them. Teacher-made big books intrigued most of the children, especially

when they compared the small book version with the enlarged text version. Similarly books in very small format, such as Sendak's (1962) Nutshell Library, captured these children's attention.

Books served a variety of social and emotional functions in the lives of these young children. Books were frequently a source of delight, especially when the language was rhythmic and predictable. Sitting in a teacher's lap and listening to stories was also source of nurturance for some children. Books were used to socialize with teachers and other children. Several pairs of children socialized together over books, usually with one child "reading" to the other, and, when a new student teacher came into the classroom, many children got acquainted with her through booksharing sessions. Books also helped children cope with difficult situations and troubling feelings, and there was intense involvement with books which dealt with common childhood fears, common illnesses, siblings, and similar topics.

Books were one way to command the attention of others or to gain some control over others. First, children could get "their book" read on request, thus controlling teacher behavior. One child frequently took control of the booksharing sessions by "reading" to the

teacher, even when she had never before encountered the book. Several children read to their peers in such a way that it was clear that the listeners were an audience watching a performance.

For some children, books also were used for language development, especially semantic and phonological development. All children learned new vocabulary through books, and a bilingual Korean child worked on learning English vocabulary from the illustrations, preferring picture labelling to listening to the text. This child, along with another child who had delayed speech development, practiced articulation in the context of booksharing, repeating words after the teacher.

The teacher's role in booksharing was a major one. She had to carefully choose books with relevant content for the children in her group and with appropriate kinds of text. During booksharing sessions she had to choose the places in the stories at which to stop and encourage children to predict the next event or the text. Above all, she had to highly value booksharing and be willing to invest long blocks of time in it at the expense of other activities which could have been occurring in the classroom.

Writing

Materials for writing were placed in the dramatic play area, art area, and writing center. Materials for writing included pencils of various types, markers, crayons, paper in a variety of colors and sizes, a typewriter, and rubber letter stamps. The writing center was a rectangular table which could accommodate three children comfortably. Most of the writing materials listed above were regularly available in the writing center.

While at the writing center children often drew pictures with colored markers or explored alphabet letters by using the typewriter, letter stamps, or writing letters or their names with the pencils or markers. There was high interest in the typewriter throughout the study. Initially most children just enjoyed manipulating it with little attention to the print. Eventually children attended to the letters, and many of them attempted to write their names with it. There was also interest in the rubber letter stamps, although not as much as that shown in the typewriter, and children generally stamped letters at random or stamped their names.

Sometimes children used personal cursive (scribble-writing) to write a message to someone, write

a story, or make a book, but this was not the typical practice at the writing center. The writing center was used for exploring letters more than for functional writing, probably because of the presence of the alphabet there. No child was observed using invented spellings in their writing.

Children wrote in a more functionally communicative way when they wrote in the dramatic play area. Children frequently wrote in this area and their writing was usually in personal cursive, although a few children used letters. Children wrote phone messages, notes to people, and many other kinds of writing. Abandoned pieces of paper with personal cursive on them were found there almost daily.

In the art area some children incorporated writing into their pictures. Sometimes letters were added after a design was made, and sometimes the letters were an integral part of the main design on children's papers. A few children would "inventory" what they knew about letters while in the art area, writing a string of letters on their page.

Usually when teachers noticed that children had written in any form, personal cursive, strings of letters written with pencil or marker, lines of typing, or stamped letters, they asked children to tell them

what they wrote. Responses ranged from silence to elaborate messages and stories. Children sometimes wrote with a specific message in mind, sometimes made up a message when the teacher asked what they had written, and sometimes there was no semantic intent in their writing.

A major writing activity in the classroom was name writing. Children were expected to write their own names on their artwork and on waiting lists. Any form in which children chose to write their names was acceptable. When a name was written unconventionally (e.g., a wavy line on the paper), the teacher wrote it in conventional form. Some children could write their names conventionally when the study began and some could not. As children were invited to write their own names, many of them demonstrated their growing awareness of the forms of the letters in their names and they moved toward writing them conventionally. Every child except one attempted to write at least the first letter of his or her name with no teacher prompting.

Some children not only mastered their own names, but enjoyed the challenge of writing a friend's name. With few exceptions the only copying that occurred in the classroom was the writing of other children's names. A word bank was introduced which included children's

names and names of their family members. These were read but not copied.

There were major differences in the level of fine motor control some of the children exhibited, ranging from excellent to very poor coordination. However this did not appear to be a major factor in how interested children were in writing. Only one child seemed frustrated by her poor motor coordination. As she grew in her awareness of the conventional form of her name, her inability to form some of the letters in it proved a source of frustration, especially if she was confronted with her name card when writing her name.

When the teacher planned language experience activities, such as thank you letters to people who had been helpful to the children, she usually asked the children to write first and then to tell her what they wrote. Most children were quite comfortable with this and wrote their messages using personal cursive, the letters of their name, or random strings of letters. A few children expressed discomfort with this sort of request, seemingly because of their awareness of the adult-conventional form of writing.

The main goal in the area of writing was to foster a desire to communicate through writing. For some children this was well-established before the study.

Other children increased the time they spent in writing over the months of the study, but a few children showed disinterest in writing in the classroom and only wrote at the teacher's request. Some children's writing seemed to mainly be an inventory of what they knew about the alphabetic system, while others were more interested in displaying their understanding of the functions of writing.

Language Experience

The teacher played a more central role in this curriculum area than in the other three for obvious reasons. The majority of the dictation experiences were initiated by the teacher and few children requested that their language be recorded. Teacher-planned dictation experiences usually were letters to people who had visited the school or who had acted as tour guides on field trips. The children also often dictated lists of things, for example, what they had seen on a fieldtrip, and these seemed to provide some of the more successful language experience events. Spontaneous experiences involved recording children's comments about their art work or writing down their requests, for example a particular seat at snack. However, throughout much of the study the teacher was quite uncomfortable with taking dictation and this had a significant impact on

the kinds of experiences provided for the children.

Often the language experience event was initiated with a request that children write first and then tell the teacher what they wrote. Children would fill their paper with personal cursive, the letters of their names, or random letters, and then, as the teacher pointed to each line, tell her what it said. The teacher explained to children that they write in one way and adults write in a different way, and that the teacher needs to write it in her way so she can remember what children said in their writing. Most children were comfortable with this, but a few preferred just dictating to the teacher. Some of the children preferred the writing part of the activity to the dictating part. On one occasion a three year old girl filled her page with personal cursive and then responded to the teacher's request, "Tell me what you wrote", by saying that the teacher did not need to write down the dictation because the child had already written her ideas down.

There was great diversity in children's interest and understanding of dictation experiences. The children who found language experience events the most engaging already held a great deal of knowledge about written language. For example, a couple of the children who were very enthusiastic about having their words

recorded were from homes in which literacy was highly valued, and language experience may have provided an opportunity for them to participate in the literate culture by allowing them to read their own words. Other children seemed intrigued when their words materialized on paper. By contrast, a few children seemed quite uninterested in language experience and said only a word or two when dictating, perhaps because they had not yet made the link between their spoken words and the recorded words. In two cases delay in language development seemed to be the factor which caused children to be uncomfortable with responding to teacher questions devised to elicit language from them.

## Discussion

The most important factor in facilitating the literacy growth of the children was the teacher. She was willing to make it a priority in how time was spent in the classroom, and her role included being responsive to children when they asked questions as they tried to make sense of written language. Typically the teacher used what children already knew about written language to further build their literacy knowledge. She gave special attention to planning for those children with limited prior experiences with print so that they had abundant opportunities to expand their literacy

knowledge. She also challenged some children to expand their interests into unexplored literacy areas such as books or writing.

Children were also challenged to further their interests in written language through interactions with peers. All children frequently observed each other's writing and reading, and the grouping of children in this class provided many opportunities for children with limited experience with written language to observe more knowledgeable peers.

The teacher had to evaluate how her time was spent in the classroom to see if adequate time was being given to supporting and challenging children in literacy growth. In some preschools elaborate activities requiring a great deal of teacher attention are frequently planned, and the value of these needs to be carefully weighed against the use of that teacher time for supporting literacy growth. One caution for early childhood educators, however, is that care should be taken not to over-emphasize literacy at the expense of other important curriculum areas. As much as possible teachers should look for ways to integrate literacy activities into other curriculum areas.

Many questions about how to support preschool children's literacy growth remain unanswered, some of

which are more philosophical than empirical. For example, prior research has clearly indicated that a child who has not developed a love of books in the early years is at a great disadvantage when he or she enters school. How far should a preschool teacher go to involve children with books? In the classroom in this study more children engaged in literacy events before lunch when several areas of the room were closed (e.g., water table and dramatic play). Should the teacher temporarily close favored areas of the classroom which provide valuable problem-solving and learning opportunities to nurture this love of books? Most young children are fascinated by written language and they appreciate adult help in making sense of it, but when literacy growth is given a dominant place in the curriculum what is lost from children's experiences? How can preschool teachers maintain a balance, especially if their children have very limited prior experiences with print?

Another important philosophical question deals with the assessment of literacy knowledge. Should the literacy growth of preschool children be assessed, and, if so, how should it be assessed and at what point should a teacher be concerned about a child's progress? One child in this classroom was from a very literate

home, yet he still had difficulty recognizing his own name at the end of the school year. It seemed unusual that this child had been able to ignore the hundreds of opportunities in the class to learn to recognize the names of his classmates. Was this reason for concern?

Because so little attention has gone to developing a naturalistic, literacy curriculum in the preschool classroom the questions and philosophical issues far outweigh the answers at this point. As early childhood education comes to grips with these questions it will be important to frame the answers in terms of the best developmental theory available while maintaining a whole child focus.

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